What Makes ACTA So Controversial
(and why MEPs should care)
What Makes ACTA So Controversial

What is ACTA?

The Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) is a plurilateral agreement which proposes international standards for enforcement of intellectual property rights. The Agreement, negotiated by a handful of countries’ in coordination with certain parts of industry, is controversial in both process and substance.

Given the problems identified with this agreement, the authors of this booklet strongly encourage European policy makers to thoroughly consider the implications of ACTA, and without satisfactory, credible assurances and clarifications, we urge the European Parliament to vote “no” on ACTA in its upcoming “consent” procedure.

The way in which ACTA was negotiated has robbed it of both democratic credibility and legal clarity. If ratified, it will also have major implications for freedom of expression and access to culture, privacy, in addition to harming international trade and stifling innovation. ACTA will almost certainly fail if the European Parliament votes to reject it. The fact that some countries have already signed (but not ratified) the text has little real meaning in international law.

Lack of Democratic Credibility

> ACTA has bypassed established multilateral forums, such as WIPO and the WTO, which are based on democratic principles and openness; with clear procedural guarantees. Multilateral diplomacy will not survive if developed countries simply ignore agreed forums whenever they do not get their way.

> ACTA was negotiated behind closed doors, leaving out most developing countries, with little democratic accountability at UN, EU or national level.

> ACTA seeks to create a new institution out of an opaque process, the “ACTA Committee,” without defining the guarantees or obligations for this new body to operate in an open, transparent, and inclusive manner that provides for public scrutiny.²

> The unelected “ACTA Committee” will be responsible for the implementation and interpretation of the Agreement, deciding the meaning of the very vague wording after the Parliament have given their approval.³

> To date, no party to ACTA has provided full public access to the negotiating documents, which are necessary to interpret the many ambiguous and unclear elements of the text. US business did have access to some documents, on condition that they sign a non-disclosure agreement. The European Commission still argues that there was and is no secrecy surrounding ACTA.⁴

> The Commission did not carry out any impact assessment specifically on ACTA, but reused old ones produced for the Intellectual Property Enforcement Directives (I and II), despite the wider range of measures proposed in ACTA. No impact assessment on the impact on fundamental rights, particularly in relation to third countries, which will often not have the same privacy, free speech and rule of law safeguards as in the EU, was undertaken.

1. Australia, Canada, the European Union, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Singapore, Switzerland and the United States

2. Chapter V Article 36 ACTA.
3. Article 36.2 ACTA.
4. The Electric Frontier Foundation (EFF) and Knowledge Ecology International (KEI) in the US have been denied access to documents. Four months after their original request, EDRi still has not received an adequate response to its request to the European Parliament for access to the documents that it holds.
5. This is explicit in, for example, footnote 13, where Internet intermediary liability protections (which remove incentives on intermediaries to interfere with private Internet traffic of all citizens) are only permissible when the narrow interests of rightsholders are protected. This approach directly contradicts the European Court of Justice rulings in the Scarlet/Sabam (C-70/10) and Telefonica/Promusicae (C-275/06) rulings.

6. Article 27.2 & Article 8.1, ACTA

7. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue, 16 May, 2011

8. ACTA's vague wording leaves the door open for countries to introduce the so-called three-strikes rule, or other disproportional enforcement measures, which would see Internet users cut off if they continued to download copyrighted material; and the issue of "commercial scale", which includes "direct and indirect economic or commercial advantage".


10. Section 4; Criminal Offences, ACTA
Harm to Trade

- Even though the EU would consider ACTA a legally binding treaty, the United States has already made it clear that it sees ACTA as a non-binding "understanding." This could create problems of legal uncertainty regarding the status of ACTA and gives the US increased flexibility that will provide a competitive advantage over the EU.

- The proposals affecting privacy and free speech elements in ACTA will be exponentially more dangerous in countries which lack fundamental rights legislation.

- ACTA could create unfair barriers to international trade. As China already proves, informal and non-law-based arrangements with Internet providers can easily be used as a non-tariff barrier to trade.

Lack of Legal Clarity

- The wording of ACTA is vague, which creates legal uncertainty on various key terms.\(^\text{11}\)

- By introducing higher enforcement standards than those that currently exist (e.g., TRIPS), with only vague and unenforceable references to safeguards, ACTA is not aligned with current international legal standards.\(^\text{12}\)

- ACTA fails to meet European standards on the protection and promotion of universality, integrity and openness of the Internet as outlined by the Council of Europe, which has asserted that "States have the responsibility to ensure, in compliance with the standards recognised in international human rights law and with the principles of international law, that their actions do not have an adverse transboundary impact on access to and use of the Internet."\(^\text{13}\)

Conclusion

ACTA risks having serious implications as it fails to find the right balance between protecting intellectual property rights and preserving the fundamental rights of society as a whole, such as freedom of expression and access to information, culture, and privacy.

The European Parliament has already highlighted the problematic issues of the Agreement in its own study of ACTA, including its serious legal flaws, stating that it is, "difficult to point to any significant advantages that ACTA provides for EU citizens beyond the existing international framework."

The study advises that, "Unconditional consent would be an inappropriate response from the European Parliament, given the issues that have been identified with ACTA as it stands."\(^\text{14}\)

We encourage European policy makers to fully consider the implications of ACTA.

Without further satisfactory assurances and clarifications, we request that the European Parliament votes ‘no’ on ACTA in its upcoming ‘consent’ procedure.

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11. Article 23.1: "commercial scale" could imply criminal procedures for indirect economic advantage and could also imply targeted monitoring on IP addresses to verify the scale of copyright infringement; Article 27.1: no definition of the "digital environment" and “expeditious remedies”; Article 27.2: no definition of “digital networks”

12. ACTA frames “commercial scale” in much broader and vaguer terms than previous agreements like TRIPS, leaving room for interpretation, effectively preventing the determination of proportionate enforcement (Article 23.1)


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